

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

July 5, 2026 – INDEPENDENCE DAY CELEBRATION – NATION'S 250TH

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Sermon: *"Set Free to Love Everyone as Christ Loves Us"*

Deuteronomy 10:17-21	(You shall worship God alone)
Psalms 145:1-9	(Exalt God and praise Him in all generations)
Hebrews 11:8-16	(By faith Abraham went to a new land)
St. Matthew 5:43-48	(Jesus teaches: Love your enemies)

On this Independence Day weekend, we rightly pause to give thanks for the blessings of our political freedom. We remember the tremendous sacrifices that were made so that the people of this country could worship, speak, gather, vote, build families, pursue work, and live with dignity—all, freely and under the protection of law. These civic freedoms are precious, and gratitude is a faithful response. However, Holy Scripture invites us to ask a deeper question: For what are we free? Freedom is not only release from tyranny; it is also a God-given opportunity and responsibility to live rightly before God and our neighbor.

That is why Jesus' words in Matthew, Chapter 5 are both challenging and necessary on a day when we celebrate the 250th Anniversary of our Nation's Independence. Christ says, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." This is not sentimental advice. It is not a call to deny pain, excuse evil, or pretend public conflicts are unimportant. It is the command of a King who knows that hatred, bitterness, and revenge do not make individuals or nations strong; they make us slaves.

In Galatians 5:1 (NIV) we hear the good news: "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery." Political freedom is a great gift, but Christian freedom is greater still. Through His sacrificial death for us, Christ has freed us from sin, death, and hell—and from *our selves*—to live freely for His Kingdom and to minister the love, mercy, compassion, and kindness of God to others.

Jesus begins today's Gospel lesson with a phrase He uses often in the Sermon on the Mount: "You have heard that it was said..." Here, he's addressing a familiar maxim: love your neighbor and hate your enemy. The command to love one's neighbor was rooted in Scripture, but the permission to hate one's enemy was a cultural distortion. It drew a circle around the people who were easy to care about and left everyone else outside.

Ordinary, run-of-the-mill love will love those who love us back, and greet those who greet us. Ordinary love is generous when it expects generosity in return. That kind of love can exist in any neighborhood, any political party, any nation, and any family. Jesus does not condemn this as worthless. But He does say loving that way is not enough to identify us as children of our Heavenly Father. The kingdom of God calls us to something deeper—and more difficult: a love that does not depend on whether the other person looks like us, agrees with us, votes like us, speaks well of us, or belongs to our social set; but rather, on the all-inclusive character of God.

In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:45), Jesus points to the Father saying, "He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." Every sunrise is a sermon on mercy. Every rainfall is a reminder that God's goodness is not limited only to those who deserve it. God does not wait for human beings to become lovable before He gives us life, breath, beauty, harvest, healing, and hope.

This does not mean God ignores justice. It does not mean wrong doesn't matter. It means God's mercy is not fragile. His kindness cannot be derailed by human hostility. When Jesus commands us to love our enemies, He is calling us to reflect the very love of God. We do not love enemies because they deserve it. We love because God loved *us* while we were still sinners, and Christ gave Himself for us—not because we deserved our salvation, but because God “so *loved* the world.”

On a national, patriotic holiday, we can celebrate civil liberties without confusing them with the Gospel. When, in Galatians 5:1, St. Paul declares, “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free,” the apostle is speaking about freedom from the yoke of *spiritual and emotional slavery*, especially the burden of trying to make ourselves right with God by human effort. This spiritual freedom reaches into every corner of life. The freedom Christ gives us is not the right to do whatever we want; it is the grace to become the person God created us to be. In Christ, we are set free from the need to prove ourselves, defend our worth, or repay every wound by wounding others.

Retaliation often disguises itself as strength, especially in anxious public seasons. We may be tempted to think freedom means saying whatever we want, striking back as hard as we can, or treating opponents as enemies to be defeated rather than neighbors to be loved. But retaliation keeps us chained to the person who hurt us. Bitterness may build a wall around us, but it slowly hardens the heart it aims to guard. Hatred promises power, but it gives our enemy the authority to shape our spirit. Jesus offers another way. He says: Pray. Pray for whoever persecutes—or hates, or mocks, or undermines—you. Bring that person before God and give them over to Him. Refuse to become judge, jury, and executioner. Let God be God, and let your heart be free.

Loving an enemy does not mean calling evil good. It does not mean remaining in danger. It does not mean pretending harm never happened. It does not mean trust is automatically restored or boundaries are unnecessary. Jesus is not commanding us to be naïve; He is commanding us to be holy. Christian love is not an emotional experience. It is a commitment—minimally—not to wish evil for another person, no matter how terrible they may seem. Moreover, Christian love seeks the true good of the other person, and sometimes that good may include holding them accountable, keeping our distance, telling the truth, or ensuring protection for the vulnerable. This matters for citizens as well as disciples.

Love of enemies does not require silence in the face of injustice, dishonesty, cruelty, or abuse of power. It does require that even when we speak firmly, advocate publicly, vote conscientiously, and disagree profoundly, we refuse to surrender our souls (or our mouths) to contempt. To pray for someone who has harmed us or opposed us is not to excuse them. It is to place them under the authority and mercy of God and to say, “Lord, I will not allow hatred or the desire for revenge to rule me, for I belong to Christ, and vengeance is Yours.” When we love our enemies, we are standing firm in Christ. We are declaring that our identity is not determined by how others treat us or by which side seems to be winning the culture wars. Our peace is not controlled by the news cycle. Our character is not up for sale. We are free people, and free people do not need to hate.

We can live as both grateful citizens and faithful Christians, while remembering that our deepest allegiance belongs to the Kingdom of God. So today, as we give thanks for the United States of America's Independence and its record of progress, liberties, generosity, and prosperity, let us remember to practice the following five things: 1) Give thanks for your political freedom. Thank God for the freedoms that allow worship, conscience, service, speech, and civic participation, and remember those who sacrificed for them. 2) Remember what your freedom is for. Christian freedom is not permission to serve ourselves; it is power given to us to serve God and our neighbor in love.

3) Pray before you speak. Before posting online, arguing in person, voting, confronting, or correcting, ask God to bless, direct, heal, and redeem—either the other person *and/or you*. Prayer may not immediately change them (or you), but it will begin to change the harm that hatred is doing to you. 4) Practice wise love in public life. Speak truth, seek justice, protect the vulnerable, and keep needed boundaries, but refuse cruelty, contempt, and revenge. 5) Remember your highest allegiance.

Christ has set you free. Do not return to the slavery of bitterness, tribalism, contempt, or fear. Seek first the Kingdom of God, and all else will follow, Jesus tells us in Matthew 6:33.

Jesus concludes today's Gospel lesson by saying, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." This is not a call to flawless performance by human strength. In fact, the Greek word used is *telēos*, which means "complete" or "finished." As such, Jesus is calling us not to perfection but to a mature freedom, and the kind of merciful, inclusive love that looks like that of our Heavenly Father. In Christ, we are not left to manufacture this love on our own. The One who commands enemy-love is also the One who loved His enemies from the Cross. He prayed, "Father, forgive them," while the nails were still in His hands. Jesus will help us to follow His directive.

So on this 4th of July weekend, hear the good news: The Declaration of Independence was very important for our Nation, but even more significant is that Christ has set us free. Free from having to pay for our sins. Free from having to earn God's love. Free from the tyranny of revenge. Free from allowing our enemies to define our future. Free to love with a love greater than our own.

Let us give thanks for the freedoms we enjoy as citizens, and let us also stand firm in the greater freedom we have in Christ. Let us allow God's infinite mercy to reshape our hearts. And by the power of the Holy Spirit, may we become the kind of people whose public witness, private conversations, civic engagement, and daily relationships show the world what God is like.

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, on this Independence Day weekend, we thank You for the gift of freedom and for all who sacrificed so that others might live with dignity and peace. Teach us not to confuse political liberty with spiritual maturity. You loved us when we were far from You, and You set us free by Your grace. Teach us to stand firm in that freedom. Free us from bitterness, resentment, contempt, tribalism, and revenge. Give us courage to love wisely, pray honestly, speak truthfully, seek justice, and reflect the mercy of our Father in Heaven. Where we need boundaries, give us wisdom. Where we need forgiveness, give us grace. Where we need healing, touch us with Your Spirit. Make us people who love not only our neighbors, but even our enemies, so that our lives may bear witness to Your Kingdom. We ask all this in Your Holy Name. *Amen.*